

ON THE POSSIBLE IDENTIFICATION OF THE EGYPTIAN ANIMAL-GOD SET

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ABSTRACT: The ancient Egyptian god Set was pictured with the head of an animal, as was true of many Egyptian deities. This animal, however, unlike the others, has never been identified. Examination of pictorial representations, as well as behavioral characteristics gleaned from ancient texts, affords a consistent model of the animal involved. An unclassified canid, possibly still in existence and related to some of the "Nandi Bear" tales, is indicated.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to review the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, and those of modern Egyptologists, about the animal, if any, attributed to the major god Set or Sutekh. The potential candidates are evaluated using a variety of ancient sources, modern zoology, and published cryptozoological material. A possible unclassified species is one of the most likely conclusions to this long-standing problem.

Dynastic Egypt had a religion filled with many intriguing deities, most of which had some animal characteristics, and were pictured with animal heads. A few of the most popular are illustrated here as Fig. 1.

The god Set had a complex and seemingly contradictory role in Egyptian religion. Generally, he was pictured as powerful and dangerous, and often simply evil. He killed Osiris, dismembered him, fought Horus, and tore out his eye, and he threatened to do likewise to Pharaoh and the everyday citizen. He is a leading candidate as a prototype of the Judaeo-Christian Devil (Russell 1977), and the name "Satan" may well derive originally from Set.

As the opponent of life and light, and the personification of evil, Set became bound to the evil Titan Typhon in Alexandrian times. Satan's medieval Christian form also owed much to Pan, as well as to Set-Typhon. But this was the view of Set in the eyes of worshippers of Osiris, and there is ample evidence that Set was revered as a powerful protective local god in Upper Egypt long before the coming of Osirian religion, and the consequent relegation of Set to his solely demonic role.

It will not be necessary to attempt to unravel the history and development of the Set concept in this article. Interested readers are referred to the books *God of Confusion* (TeVelde 1967), *The Origins of Osiris* (Griffiths 1966), and *The Conflict of Horus and Seth* (Griffiths 1960) for more details. In summary, the following list of ideas expresses my own conclusions upon this poorly understood and widely debated subject:



FIG. 1.—The Hawk-headed Sun-god, the Jackal-headed god of mummification, the Ibis-headed god of “science” and magic.

- 1) Set was originally a local god in Upper (Southern) Egypt, possibly as early as the predynastic Nagada culture.
- 2) Like most, if not all, Upper Egyptian deities, Set was zoomorphic (animal-formed), in contrast to the largely anthropomorphic gods of the Nile Delta.
- 3) Set's followers represented a power in regional politics in Upper Egypt, perhaps *the* power. Unification of Egypt under the kingship of Horus-devotees may have been symbolized in the Horus-Set conflict.
- 4) Later, upon arrival of Osirian religion (in its ascendancy in the 5th Dynasty), myths became bent and invented anew to accommodate the new power. Set became the epitome of evil, and acquired certain “alien” characteristics.
- 5) Set continued to maintain a strong following even then, and is equated often with the power of the South. The other theriomorphic gods of certain Upper Egypt cities (partners in the Southern alliance) are thereby given “Sethian” qualities.

These changes in the religious and political roles of Set allow us to eliminate later contaminations of the god's nature, and to clarify our picture of the animal originally involved.

THE FORM OF SET

Representations of Set in pre-dynastic Egypt are rare and debated. The most convincing is the mace-head of King Scorpion in the “protohistoric” period (ca. 3000 B.C.) (Fig. 2). Egyptologists are fairly certain that this form is meant to represent Set, since it contains the four most visual characteristics: 1) a canid-like quadrupedality; 2) an up-raised tail; 3) a long, hooked muzzle; and 4) peculiarly squared prick ears.

Once writing flourishes in the Pyramid texts, Set animals appear volu-



FIG. 2.—The mace-head Set figure (ca. 3000 B.C.).

minously in the hieroglyphics of the 5th Dynasty Unas Pyramid. This simple stick-form glyph is written thus: . Later hieroglyphs for Set became more elaborate (Fig. 3). The last of these is a typical later Osirian “contamination”: Set as the ass which threshes the Osirian wheat, with a knife in his snout. Two other examples of Set-forms from Egyptian art appear in Fig. 4.

EGYPTOLOGICAL CANDIDATES

There seem to have been as many animals related to Set as there were animals to choose from. Egyptologists have been hampered in their work, not only by the unusual physical characteristics of the drawings, but also by the variety of animals spoken of as “Sethian” in the old texts. Here is a certainly incomplete list of proposed candidates: crocodile, hippopotamus, serpent, ass, camel, fennec, jerboa, hare, long-snouted mouse, pig, oryx, giraffe, gazelle, auroch, hyena, European boar, orycteropus (aardvark), long-snouted mormyr, various canids, and even a bird (TeVelde 1967).

In the face of all this confusion, three possibilities arise:

- 1) the Set animal, whatever it was, is now gone, probably hunted to extinction by the Egyptians themselves;
- 2) the Set animal never existed; it was a fabulous creature meant to represent the awesome power of darkness and death;
- 3) the problem is so complex it is insoluble, so we might as well not try to solve it.



FIG. 3.—Later hieroglyphs representing the animal-god Set.

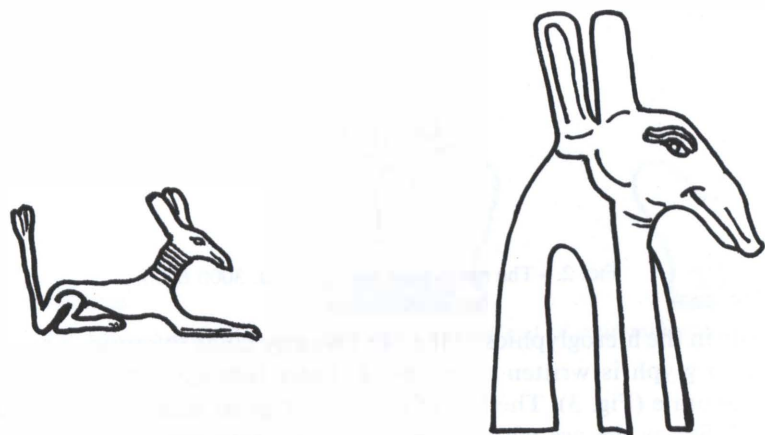


FIG. 4. — An Old Kingdom drawing of Set reclining (TeVelde 1967), and Set in typical wiggled-god form.

To any legitimate researcher, possibility 3) deserves little respect; this author believes that possibility 2) is not viable in this case either. The reasons are simple, even obvious. *All* other theriomorphic deities of Set's antiquity have been clearly associated with known animals. And all of these "contemporaries" of Set display coherent behavioral characteristics of such animals in their myths, a display apparently also true of Set. Most Egyptologists seem to feel that, despite the difficulty of pinpointing what Set was, a real animal was behind it. An expression of this position from one of the most famous scholars in the field follows:

In the absence of any facts on the subject we must assume that the animal which was the symbol of Set was one that prowled about by night in the deserts and in the waste places of the towns and cities, and that his disposition was hostile to man, and wicked generally, and that owing to his evil reputation he was hunted and slain with such diligence that he became extinct in comparatively early times [Budge 1969].

We can eliminate the majority of the choices in the above list rather quickly, thus reducing our analysis to manageable proportions. These eliminations fall into three categories:

- 1) There are many "Sethian" animals which are obviously not *the* Set animal, but which represent other theriomorphic gods and goddesses related to Southern Egypt. These include the gazelle, the pig, the crocodile, the hippopotamus, the mormyr, the oryx, the aurochs, and even the turtle. Note that all are real animals (the mormyr was a sacred fish), although one, the aurochs, is extinct.

- 2) There are two further animals which became associated with Set later, due to alterations caused by Osirian religion: the serpent and the ass. No one has mistaken snakes for Set, but a word on the ass-onager is required. This animal was once associated with the sun-god, but got mixed into the Set story by a series of convolutions involving a myth where Osiris sits on Set (to show dominance), then rides on him (as a *boat* across the sky), then is dismembered by him (as Osirian grain is threshed in ass-drawn mills), and finally rides him as an ass. Thus are myths and muddlements made.
- 3) Several other animals have been proposed, apparently out of desperation and without any regard to the content of the ancient texts, simply in the hope of at least partially matching the appearances. These include the European boar, the camel, the long-snouted mouse, the fennec fox, the hare, the giraffe, the jerboa, and the armadillo. None of these relate at all well to the animal behaviors of Set, and none match the physical appearance well enough to rationalize ignoring that important inconsistency. Concerning the armadillo, however, there is a slight chance that it may play a role. Its abandoned burrows are often used by animals which very much resemble the Set animal in its behaviors.

Thus, we are left with the following possibilities: a) known canids; b) crypto-canids; c) hyenas; d) crypto-hyenas; and e) an as-yet unclassified animal form.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SET

The following details constitute the significant behavioral and physical attributes of Set, as extracted from ancient texts: 1) strength, aggressiveness, and viciousness; 2) a prowler and stalker; 3) a wild beast of the night; 4) a carnivore and a carrion-eater; 5) a stealer and dismemberer of dead bodies; 6) an odor-tracker; 7) foul smelling; 8) maker of a loud noise; 9) a spewer of dangerous saliva; 10) having reddish or reddish-brown color and possibly a black face (Budge 1969); 11) one similar to the "Sebau fiends" of the *Book of the Dead* (Budge 1909), who come to kill and dismember in packs; 12) a canid-like form, larger than a jackal; 13) an erect, tufted tail even when seated; 14) a curved snout held near ground when tracking; and 15) long pricked squared or flattened ears.

Some sample texts describing these qualities of the Set animal are quoted below:

Deliver me from this god who seizes souls and licks that which is rotten, who lives on offal and is in darkness and obscurity, who terrifies the weary—it is Set! [TeVelde 1967].

The great Ennead has saved thee . . . They have prevented him from spluttering his saliva against thee [Griffiths 1966].

Get back, Blackface, skilled with your smell, dweller in the Mansion of the Desert, disturber who is sent in storm. O you who live by your thefts . . . (the deceased) will not give his powers to the messengers of Set who live by their thefts [Faulkner 1977].

Purify this place of the confederates of the Malefactor (Set), who have come from the slaughterhouses and whose smell is still fresh [Clark 1959].

There are two other sources which may add some insight into this creature. In the hieroglyphs, Set's name was transliterated *štš*. Using this as a stem-word, two other characteristics often applied to Set were written as *tštš* (to cut to pieces) and *tši* (to turn away or desert). The point of this is that the Bible speaks of a creature whose Hebrew name transliterates to *tsiy*. It appears at least six times in Psalms, Isaiah, and Jeremiah (United Bible Societies 1972). It related to a wild desert animal which howls or yelps, and which was envisioned sometimes as a hyena, a cat, a demon, a night monster, or as the "people" inhabiting the desert (the ravenous beasts which devour human bodies).

Another possibly related point from the ancients: the old peoples tended to make a distinction between dogs and hounds (Merlen 1971). Hounds, although still dangerous, were human bred and "good." Dogs, obviously dangerous, were wild and "evil." The idea of the dog and the Hound of Hell as the embodiment of an ultimate evil power has come down through all history to us today. The wolf often bears the brunt of this stigma, much to its detriment. The Bible portrays dogs as wild destroyers and dismemberers.

A more modern set of myths may also relate to our story. Some anthropologists believe that the religion of the Yoruba people of West Africa consists partially of ideas dating back to Egyptian concepts. Their evil deity, Esu, supposedly incorporates "Sethian" characteristics (Lucas 1970). Esu seems to be like a "savage dog." The god rules the nocturnal hours, and has dogs sacrificed to him. Esu's other name, Obalufon, is derived from Typhon, the Greco-Roman name for Set.

A further cluster of African ideas involves Eastern and Central African legends of the "*kerit*" or "*chimiset*." The latter name is intriguing in that it incorporates Set's name. Some of the attributes embedded in the tales of this animal are "a howling, hideous cry," "nocturnal," "something like a hyena," "large and savage," "reddish or black fur," "plume tail," "very long standing ears" (Hichens 1937, Heuvelmans 1958). Heuvelmans reports that the *chimiset* is felt to be the "devil," and that the urine "is said to be so evil smelling that no man can stay near it." The collected tales have been grouped together in an attempt to illuminate a possible cryptozoological species named "the Nandi Bear" by white settlers. The tales seem to be telling more than one story, however, at least to this author. Some, as in the details mentioned above, sound quite like the Set animal; others, are not at all analogous. One may well wonder if the Set animal, or something like it, is a *part* of the Nandi Bear mystery.

CANIDS AND HYENAS

There are eleven African representatives of the wild Canidae known to exist today. There are six foxes, three jackals, the Abyssinian wolf, and the wild hunting dog. Five of these forms (four foxes and the golden jackal) are still native to the Egyptian region. The wild dog, *Lycaon pictus*, has a northernly range just approaching the southern boundary of modern Egypt (Fox 1975).

The foxes seem to have few attributes relating to Set, but do point out something worth keeping in mind. When speaking of the sand fox, *Vulpes pallida*, a prominent text states: "Almost nothing is known about this species" (Fox 1975). When speaking of Ruppell's fox, *Vulpes ruppelli*, the same text repeats: "Not much is known about this species which inhabits the stony desert in Northern Africa." The point, which will be obvious to cryptozoologists, is simply that the Sahara desert region continues to hold many zoological mysteries, and probably a number of uncatalogued species as well.

The golden jackal bears much more resemblance to Set. It is the most nocturnal of the jackals. It is mostly carnivorous, and a scavenger. It has pale reddish-brown fur, and hunts in groups (although not usually organized ones). But the jackal's diminutive size is against it. The Bible referred to the jackals as "the little foxes," a far cry from the demonic *tsiy*. The Egyptians saw the jackals as much less fearsome than Set, and had several small dog/jackal deities, including possibly the original form of Osiris himself.

This leaves us with *Lycaon pictus*, the wild hunting dog. This animal has been placed in a separate sub-family from the wolves and dogs in the genus *Canis*, largely on anatomical grounds (i.e., only four digits on each foot) (Fox 1975). Molecular biology and chromosome counts, however, indicate that they and several other canids are probably interfertile (Fox 1975). *Lycaon* has the same number of chromosomes (78) as several other common canids, such as *Canis aureus*, *Canis familiaris*, and *Canis lyas*. This is often taken by molecular biologists as indicating genetic closeness. *Lycaon pictus* has many Set characteristics, including a very powerful, musky odor, and the "blackface," but fails in several important areas: non-nocturnalness, distinctive non-ruddy coat, and the facial structure dissimilarities. A side-note: when the *Lycaon* bitch is raising pups, she inhabits the burrows of the aardvark. Jackals do something similar. A minor theory for Set, therefore, could involve a synthesis of characteristics between the aardvark and a wild canid.

There is, of course, another canid of Egypt which is quite like Set, the ancient hunting greyhound-like variety of *Canis familiaris*. In order to evaluate whether a Set-like animal could be a relative of the ancient greyhound, it would be valuable to know where these hounds came from. Unfortunately, theories on the origins and evolution of dog breeds are in even more conflict

and uncertainty than the Set problem itself (Epstein 1971). In summary, however, we can state the following:

- 1) Greyhound-like dogs are known at their earliest in both Egypt and Mesopotamia in pre-dynastic times, and are felt to have been originally bred in one area or the other.
- 2) Theories of descent have been described from *Simenia simensis*, the Abyssinian wolf, from *Canis aureus lupaster*, the golden jackal, from *Canis lupus pallipes*, the Indian wolf, or from Egyptian Pariah dogs. None of these theories seem fully satisfactory, yet all point to some cross-breeding of "local" canines, usually of a wild sort.
- 3) Ancient desert rock art shows humans accompanied by elongated hunting dogs with long tails and prick ears, indicating that greyhound-like animals were domesticated around northern desert regions in prehistoric Egyptian times (Epstein 1960).
- 4) The earliest pictures all show the dogs with "ringed" tails, which the Egyptians tell us were bred into the dogs. We even know that the name of this type of dog was *tesem*, and it became widely valued in North Africa. We also know that a lot of breeding effort was needed to incorporate a curl into the ancestor's straight-tailed nature (Epstein 1971).
- 5) A specific "modern" fact is that the East African Middle Nilotic greyhound called the Shilluk seems to express several Set-like and possibly primitive physical characteristics (fox-red coat with black muzzle, five front toes but only four back ones, ears pricked but drooping at tips, long robust tail broadening at tip).

So, one Set candidate could have been a highly dangerous canid, morphologically related to the greyhounds, but with certain physical and behavioral differences bred out by the Egyptians.

The problem areas involved are: a) Set has certain non-greyhound behaviors (odor tracking; nocturnalness; man-eating viciousness); b) the hooked nose; c) the erect tail; and d) the peculiar ears. Regarding a), the viciousness can be adequately explained. The ancients were in constant fear of being attacked by their own hounds. The primitive ferocity of the meat-hunters was often too evident (Merlen 1971). The problem of a greyhound ancestor having good odor tracking and a willingness to prowl at night can also be explained. Most wild canids have these qualities. Any mixing of genes to produce the primitive greyhound could have easily involved an animal with these common attributes. The other three areas present more of a difficulty.

The hooked nose: There are a few useful facts which have been recorded which may point to a solution of this odd Set-like feature. First, there is a wide margin for variation of muzzle lengths even within a single species.

Canis familiaris, for instance, typically shows neotenuous characteristics of shorter jaw and snout lengths than its wilder predecessors. A greyhound and its predecessors might differ similarly. For reasons no one fully understands, wild animals, such as wolves, show longer muzzles and greater variability in size than those born in captivity (Epstein 1971). Also, southernly wolves, though smaller overall, have longer muzzles than northernly ones, and animals of the same species have different body builds and facial proportions depending upon the latitude of their particular ranges. The point is that wild canids have quite a large actual and potential variation in muzzle length and jaw structure. Some varieties have evidence, admittedly unusual, of a convex rather than concave or straight splanchnocranium (the bone anterior to the neuro-cranium which could give the profile a downward curved aspect). Also, small changes in the tissues or hair color overhanging the bone structure can give a curved appearance, as is sometimes true with the Borzoi breed of dog, for example.

Ancient breeders have also let it be known that their hounds had this "hooked nose" quality buried, rather shallowly, in their genetics. The Greek historian, Xenophon, reporting on hound breeding in his time, noted that, when the two most famous breeds, the Alopecid and the Castorian were crossed, a variety of forms arose. A common type, built high-in-the-leg and with a hooked nose, was not valued and was often destroyed (Merlen 1971). Also, a pictograph from the Mesopotamian city of Uruk shows a greyhound-like animal with a curved muzzle and an erect tail. To this author, the Greek testimony is conclusive as to the curved muzzles of some ancient hound relatives.

The erect, tufted tail: Although modern greyhounds often have "rat-tails" without tufts, this is not always so. The Shilluk, as we have mentioned, broadens the tail at the tip, and a recent example from Aqaba showed a bushier tail and prick ears. In both the rock art of the Sahara and the depictions of predynastic Egypt, the dogs were shown with ringed tails, which were deliberately bred into the animals. We know that the primitive wild tail, therefore, was quite different from that desired. The Egyptians may have been deliberately breeding out a symbol of wildness and danger. Theorists suggest that looking for the curve of the tail was the quick method of evaluating how wild the dog was. Today, we can still see the "alpha" or dominant wolf in a pack raise its tail vertically as a display of its pre-eminence (Hall and Sharp 1978). One drawing from old Egypt shows a short-muzzled hound sitting, but still with an erect tail. Maybe it was an artistic error, maybe not (Epstein 1971).

The peculiar "squared" ears: The Egyptians not only did not like the erect, straight tail of the hound, but they did not like the primitive ears either. They tell us this by their paintings across the dynasties: the erect prick ears

gradually disappear, until they are never seen in later times. It therefore seems that they actively bred out the primitive ear conformations as well. Variations still occur, however. On Ibiza, a hound is described with "peculiar square-shaped ears and a convex splanchnocranium." In Bantu society, a prick-eared greyhound is almost identical to the early Egyptian variety. Even more intriguingly, both the Bantu and Egyptian dogs had their ears cropped. Why would this be? The Egyptians are silent, but the Bantus explain: it is to protect them against rabies (the spluttering saliva of Set?).

Before concluding, we should discuss another possible candidate for Set: the hyenas. These animals have many Set-like qualities: strength, aggression, viciousness, prowling, nocturnal life, possible correct coloration and "black-face," carnivorous, carrion-eater, body stealer and dismemberer, will attack in numbers, tracking by odor, possessors of a vile smell, and marking territory in sitting position with tail erect (Cloudsley-Thompson 1967). The Bible word *tsiy* seems related to a longer Hebrew word meaning hyena (United Bible Societies 1972), and some skins allegedly belonging to the Nandi Bear have turned out to be those of brown hyenas (Kingdom 1977).

A primitive or proto-hyena is a somewhat better possibility, and a bit of commentary about hyenid evolution is appropriate. The evolution of the hyenids is not well understood. Many forms are only very partially preserved in the fossil record, and the species tend to be differentiated primarily on the basis of tooth structure. This, however, is of interest to our subject, for tooth structure indicates "lifestyle," possibly even a more or less Set-like lifestyle. This is because, while most hyenids were adapted to scavenging (with bone-crushing teeth), some, like modern-day *Crocota*, were at least partially adapted to an active predator role (with meat-slicing teeth). Could an early form of *Crocota*, or a *Crocota*-like hyenid have terrorized Egyptians in pre- and proto-historic times, and perhaps still survive today as the basis for some of the Nandi Bear tales?

The origin of *Crocota*-like hyenids in Africa is in debate (Ewer 1967). Some believe that the species originated in Africa. Others believe that it, or a precursor, radiated from Asia (which would have made Egypt its first African home). Evolutionary ecologists point out that the presence of large numbers of individual scavengers (such as jackals, hyenas, etc.) requires the presence of efficient predators to provide the kills. Did the felids of North Africa provide such numbers, or was another predator, perhaps the Set animal—a predatory hyenid—also active?

Recent fossil finds (Berta 1981) make the predatory hyenid possibility stronger. A North American species, *Chasmaporthetes ossifragus*, has been described with several characteristics more Set-like than hyenids existing today: dentition indicating an active predatory lifestyle, elongated (more dog-like) body build, indicating great running ability, generally more powerful musculature, generally large size, and a relatively long muzzle with

evenly sloping snout. *C. ossifragus* has been compared to the extinct European hyenid, *Euryboas*, a possible early invader of (or transplant from?) the African continent. If there were *Euryboas* or similar type hyenids in the Egyptian area in pre- or proto-historic times, they would make formidable candidates for Set. Unfortunately, *Euryboas* as it is known, possessed a shorter muzzle than *Chasmaporthetes*, but perhaps variations could be more Set-like in this characteristic. In truth, as yet unknown hyenids with even greater Set-like resemblance may have existed now that the American work has shown us some of the extent of possible variation. Furthermore, most Nandi Bear reports seem more hyenid in details. The hyena as generally described above could easily be named Set, and it continued to inspire dread in Medieval Europeans, who painted it with a split, tufted tail, and compared it with the Devil (White 1960). Even so, in this author's mind, the body-build of the Set animal as represented by the ancients makes some form of canid the preferred choice, and the hyena remains a secondary candidate.

CONCLUSIONS

After reviewing the pertinent evidence, we can reduce the possibilities to four when attempting to identify the Set animal:

- 1) A greyhound predecessor native to the desert regions of Upper Egypt, and possibly ranging further south.
- 2) A "misfiring" cross-breed produced by the Egyptians from other primitive wild canids.
- 3) Some oddly formed hyena or hyena-like species.
- 4) A unique (in Egyptian mythology) synthesis of qualities of various desert animals (aardvark, wild dog, hyena).

This author prefers the first possibility. The fourth possibility is unsatisfying in that all early illustrations of Egyptian gods are of real animals. Why Set should be the one exception is difficult to rationalize. The third possibility has some attractions, but African hyaenas are so different in basic body-build from the animal commonly illustrated as Set that the "odd hyaena" species would need to be very odd indeed. The second possibility is awkward in the author's mind, since it requires the Set animal to be the artificial selection product of human designs, albeit an undesirable one. It is difficult to imagine why Egyptian breeders would allow enough of such genetic misfires to live and subsequently become a dangerous element in Egyptian life.

Possibility number one, a greyhound predecessor, is very attractive in almost every aspect. The images of Set and the structure of ancient greyhounds are identical in basic body build. Many "personality traits" of Set are seen in wild canids today. The odd structural characteristics of face and tail are possibly rationalizable as extreme elements of forms seen in modern canids and in ancient pictures and descriptions of their predecessors.

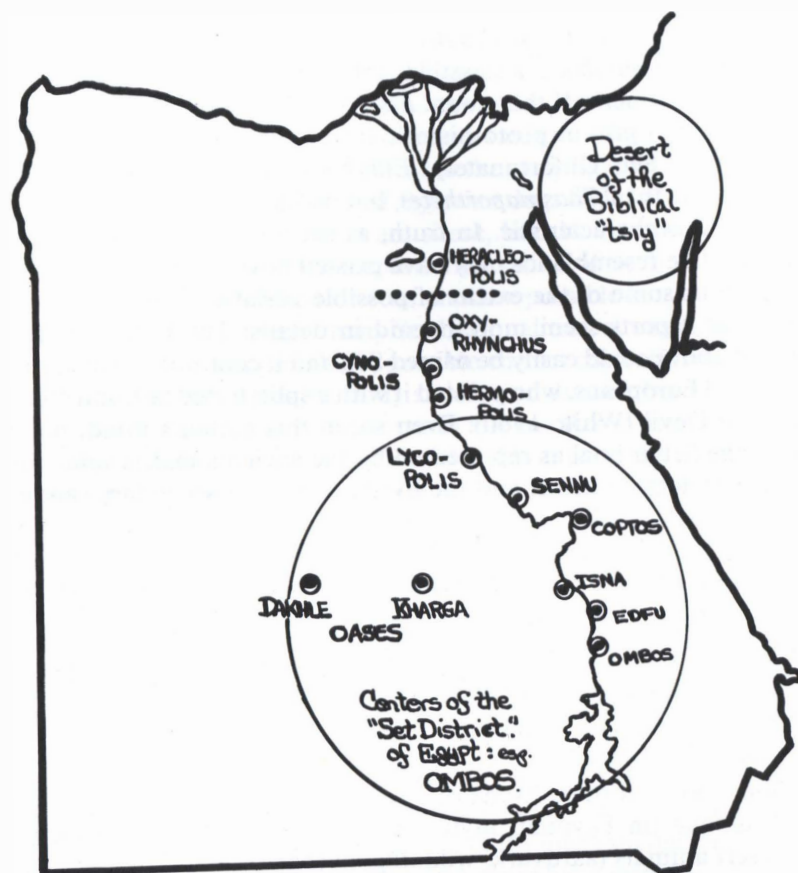


FIG. 5.—The ancient range of the Set-animal as speculated from the traditional worship sites and supplementary information (i.e., Lycopolis was allegedly the place where an Ethiopian army was driven off by a band of "wolves" in the desert).

The problem with the canid hypothesis is familiar to all cryptozoologists: we do not have the animal; we do not even have the bones. However, considering that modern reports of unclassified animals somewhat resembling Set occur in both East-central Africa and in the stony deserts west of the Nile, perhaps someday we will. The accompanying map (Fig. 5) was prepared on the basis of the clustering of the traditional worship sites of Set, as a hint of what at least its ancient zoogeographic range may have been.

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